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Nothing left to learn: translation and the Groundhog Day of bureaucracy

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Abstract

Beyond the existing theorizing of translation as a creative disruption in both occupational and semantic terms, the current study explores it critically in the experiential framework of professional translators and as a meaning-making process. Acknowledging the role of translation in creating dialogic and radical climates for learning, the article proposes to explore the other side of this relationship by studying how the limiting of space for translation delimits the possibilities for meaning-creation thus precluding dialogue. In addition to this general point, it ponders the specific aporia of organizationally-embedded adversity of translation in the occupational context (apparently) devoted to semantic labour, namely that of translator’s work. It demonstrates that the rigidity of meaning-making and the inexorableness of partaking in the uncanny déjà vu, are the reflections of specific organizational (bureaucratic) frame, and posits that they may be used as experiential and semantic heuristics for better understanding learning and non-learning in organizations.

Keywords

Bureaucracy, learning, parasite, Serres, translation, uncanny.

Introduction

The liminal notion of organizational learning associated with the relaxation of rules and enabling a space for acquisition of new knowledge is increasingly discussed as a valid practical and theoretical alternative to more controllable frameworks (Clegg, Kornberger and Rhodes, 2004; 2005; citation concealed for review purposes). The aim is to typically reflect on the current dynamics of organizational knowledge accumulation and learning processes, rather than to further the agenda of efficiency (Clegg et al., 2004). Such account takes into consideration the emerging conceptualization of societal dynamics underlying the organizational realities in terms of destabilization (Kostera, 2014) and liquidity (Bauman, 2000), as well as transparency and translucency of the social process (Gabriel, 2005; citation concealed for review purposes). This ‘becoming’ perspective (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987) on organization and organizing construes learning as a continuous process devoid of clear-cut boundaries, and in relational rather than essentialist terms. In this vein, Clegg, Kornberger and Rhodes conceptualized learning, in the consultancy profession, in terms of ongoing ‘translations’ “bridging between different language games that shape

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organizational reality” (2004, p. 40). Similarly, their useful concept of ‘parasitic’ consulting (Clegg et al., 2004), enabling for self-reflexivity and dialogism of the learning process, is well aligned with the recent theorizing of learning in emergent (Antonacopoulou and Chiva, 2007), socially-embedded (Gherardi, Nicollini and Odella, 1998), deconstructive (Garrick and Rhodes, 1998) and radical (citation concealed for review purposes) terms.

And yet, despite concurring that those creatively disruptive ‘translations’ (Barrett, 1998) are sought for in organizations (Clegg, et al., 2004), the current study proposes to reflect on the possible limits of conceptualizing organizations in terms of ‘becoming’. Emphasizing these constructions of organizational realities, which already ‘became’, the other side of organizational learning is explored through scrutinizing the ‘bridging’ capacity of ‘translation’ within the translator’s occupation itself. The parasitic logic applied to translator’s work immersed in the bureaucratic semantic frame points towards the uncanny notions associated with mechanistic disambiguation obliterating the dialogism of organizational learning processes. As observed by Kociatkiewicz and Kostera, attempts at control and ordering of individual and organizational identities create the feeling of oppression and the resulting inclination towards resistance or fatalistic resignation (2010, p. 277). Thus emerges ‘shadow’: which consists of elements, which in the process of identity construction remained unacknowledged and rejected (2010, p. 257).

The empirical case study used here is a somewhat extreme portrayal of organizational dynamics evoking the ‘shadow’ experience. The case in question is analysed through employing two closely related theoretical frameworks: ‘parasitic logic’ and the non-concept of ‘uncanny’. The study posits that despite organizational worlds emerging constantly (Clegg et al, 2005), the emergence patterns may be stable and mechanisms of control recurrent: the translator’s Groundhog Day consists of uncanny moments of being constantly reminded how unlikely change may be.

Inquiring into the linguistically mediated experience of ‘strange familiarity’ enables for rendering accessible the processes of colonizing the allegedly autonomous profession by strictly bureaucratic logic as well as creates the possibility to combine semantic and experiential dimensions in studying organizations. Covering the conceptual landscape of this research will precede and provide bearings for the subsequent analysis of interpretivist material. The study demonstrates how the rigidity of meaning-making and the inexorableness of partaking in the uncanny déjà vu can be considered experiential and semantic heuristics of particular organizational form entailing consequences for the prospect of organizational learning and non-learning.

The area of inquiry

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Repetition is among the classic themes of philosophical reflection on human condition (e.g. Kierkegaard, 1843/1964; 1844/1980) and it expectedly invites organizational inquiry into the role of incessantly recurring cognitive fragments (Weick, 1979) of which organizational sense-giving and sense-making are made (Pratt, 2000a; 2000b). Naturally, retelling the acquired knowledge through repetition is also one way to evoke (‘single-loop’) learning (Argyris, 1977). However, exploring the learning process in a poststructural spirit invites broadening of the scope of inquiry beyond the mere fact of repetition. The relatively underused notion of ‘uncanny’ (exceptions include Jay, 1995; Miller, 1976; Ffytche, 2012; and Royle, 2003) and the conceptual framework associated with it, seem to provide a fitting pathway for exploring the repetition and recurrence in learning in experiential terms.

In the institutional context of the current study, the bureaucratic formalization enforcing coercion (Adler and Borys, 1996) extends to the intellectual processes rarely conceptualized in such terms, namely the textual translation. In this respect, the experience of uncanniness (rather than e.g. its aesthetics discussed by Beyes and Steyaert [2013]) provides an interesting and underexplored avenue for organization studies research. Conceptually, the study is also informed by the Derrida’s theory of translation (Derrida 1976; 1985; 1987; 1988a; 1997a; 1997b; 1998a; 1998b; 2001) and Serresian ‘parasitic logic’ (1982).

'Parasite'

The notion of 'parasite' is one way in which Derrida renders the ambivalence of and tension within the text (cf. 'supplement' (Derrida, 1976), 'pharmakon' (Derrida, 1981) and 'différance' (Derrida, 1978)) in order to critically approach the metaphysics of presence: a problematic predilection to favour the performative side of the established pairs of binaries, such as identity/difference or normal/abnormal (1976). Notably, host/parasite also belongs to this list (Derrida, 1988a), absolving the 'parasitism' from any form of negative connotation. Thus, the parasite is a form of exteriority, foreign and yet necessarily internal – paraphrasing Derrida one could say that being a host *entails* having a parasite. For Derrida all signs are iterable, that is they are repeatable across contexts (Derrida, 1988a). While the presupposed trans-contextuality enables subsequent iterations to remain 'the same', their being so, says Derrida, means that they can be recontextualized – or 'transported' (Derrida, 1988a) [1]. For a sign to be recognizable as a sign it needs to be both sensitive and insensitive, pliable and resistant to its new context (Nakassis, 2013). The meaning of a sign, argues Derrida, can be determined at any particular moment only if it is inherently indeterminate – this effectively splits the sign into what it is across contexts and what it is in a particular context, in other words into what it 'is' and what it 'is not' (Derrida, 1988a). Citation is what makes a sign transferable. That every sign may be cited means that it must be capable of losing its origins and of being recontextualized, otherwise it would not fulfil

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its function (Derrida, 1988a). This otherness inscribed within the sign, ‘the parasite’ living off the sign’s actual ‘body’ is not simply external (Derrida, 1988a, p. 70). It is inextricably bound with the sign itself and, context permitting, occasionally takes over. The parasite – that which is added, and yet remains internal – enables the sign to travel between contexts and to be comprehended – tentatively apprehended – within them. Derridian ‘logic of the parasite’ finds a reflection in his construal of translation [2]. Terms are never ‘pure’, they always infect one another even within a single language – between different languages this process exacerbates (Derrida, 1998b). For Derrida a ‘good’ translation means that some sort of ‘a universal language’ (Chattopadhyay, 2012) is preserved, so that the reconciliation among languages is possible. The necessary condition for that to happen is to resist the temptation of densely ‘filling-up’ the translation with meaning; the ‘lack’ or a ‘remainder’ must be left. To be able to render meanings in different languages those meanings need to be comparable, but not identical – the space for ambiguity must be left in order to enable signifiers to float and oscillate. Meaning resides in the un-decided space which ‘lacks’ immutable criteria – stabilizing them and inflexibly attaching signs to particular places in the structure disables true communication since the transmission of meanings becomes impossible (Derrida, 2001).

The parasite takes without intending to give (the relation is asymmetrical), but it does – as argued by Michel Serres – engender change in its host (Serres, 1982). Serres’

position is interesting here since it applies no less to communication theory than the history of human relations (Brown, 2002), thus accounting for the intersubjectivity of parasitic logic. The externality of the parasite may be demonstrated not only through semantic connection, but through the entirely exogenous, and thus new, platform of communication. In that respect Serres evokes a parable featuring the beggar, who soothes his hunger by smelling the tasty dishes prepared in the nearby restaurant. On that note, the cook approaches him demanding payment for the (alleged) services rendered. The emerging dispute between the two is resolved by a passer-by who throws the coin on the pavement and while it clings he announces that this sound should be a sufficient payment for the fragrance of the food never consumed (Serres, 1982). In Serres' reading of the story, the stranger does not provide anything apart from intrusion, but his intervention enables both parties to reformulate their relationship and effectively find a way to relate to one another. For Serres, this mechanism captures the basic rule according to which all human relations are formed: communication is enabled because the interrupter - the parasite - acts as a mediator by enforcing one of two choices both leading to a common action by the parties: they must decide to either incorporate it or to cooperate in order to expel it (1982). The meaningful exchange entails noise and interference produced in the course of transmission (ibid.). Being the disruption and interference, the parasite plays a crucial role in the development of ideas or theories and thus is constitutive for communication to occur (ibid.).

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The parasite’s semantic capacity to make communication meaningful (Derrida) and its role as an intersubjective condition of possibility for any communication to take place (Serres) can be seen as complimentary aspects of subjectively and intersubjectively meaningful communication. The embodied dimension of Serresian parasitic logic seems perfectly exemplified by the figure of the translator: his/her role is to enable the understanding of a specified content in another language – that is to find a way in which the two sets of signs can communicate with one another. Bar exceptions, the translator is not expected to create something new, but rather to retell a particular story using the words different to those, which were used by the original author. And yet, just like the passer-by from Serresian tale, s/he is not passive: the translator’s agency is directed towards finding this particular level at which similar senses can be rendered. The act is parasitic: translator’s disruptive action uses resources already provided by both languages, enabling them to communicate with each other (by exploiting them).

The conceptual abstraction of parasitic logic metaphorically emphasizes the positively heterogenous nature of a sign and the ‘disruptive’ essence of communication, rather than bemoaning their disappearance. The parasite stands for an integral part or side of our nature and of our language enabling us to create new meanings and learn. It does not mean that all communication is ‘parasitic’ and therefore that dialogic learning will necessarily characterize all social interactions. On the contrary, while the logic of the

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9 parasite entails the futility of removal and reappearance of redacted content, it does not
10 preclude an effort to do so; in fact the remainder of this article describes one (of many,
11 surely) such attempts. The notion of ‘uncanny’ helps to understand the context and
12 phenomena accompanying such eradication process.
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17 18 19 20 *‘Uncanny’* 21

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23 The uncanny is that which doesn’t sit with us because it is at the same time strange and
24 familiar (Royle, 2003). The ‘transcendent’ may easily be contained precisely because it
25 is not yet categorized and appropriated – it does not *yet* form part of an established
26 order. A foreign element – an idea, justification or reasoning transcending all categories
27 – may become a natural candidate to patch the holes in the current sensemaking process
28 (e.g. Pratt, 2000a) and enable to learn something new (Otzal and Hinz, 2001). However,
29 the strangely familiar – uncanny – is not otherworldly, it slips between the categories,
30 defies easy classification. Originally, ‘uncanny’ was construed in clinical terms and
31 qualified as disorientation originated due to the impression of foreignness of a thing or
32 incident (Jentsch, 1906/1995, p. 2). Such impression is subjective, it may depend on
33 previous experiences or be eradicated through training, hence no objective definition of
34 the uncanny can be given. However, Jentsch identifies the typical instances in which
35 ‘unhomelines’ can occur: bafflement regarding the conditions of origin of a particular
36 act (for instance involving unusual strength or endurance); the confusion (or expectation
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that confusion may arise) between animate and inanimate objects (e.g. steamboat may be taken for a living creature and a giant snake for a piece of wood) and the disorientation ensuing from observation of bodily or psychological dysfunctions and diseases (1906/1995). Especially the latter theme – a horror of not being able to grasp our body and psyche, that which is closest to us – is continued in Freud’s (polemic towards Jentsch) analysis of the uncanny (1919). For Freud, the uncanny ‘belongs to all that is terrible’ (1919, p. 1) by leading us back to something long known, once very familiar (ibid.). In this seminal work Freud recalls struggling to find his bearings in the pleasure district of a foreign Italian town and finds it uncanny how he involuntarily keeps coming back to the same place over and over again. The involuntary repetition forces upon us the idea of ‘faith’ and ‘inescapability’ (p. 11), where we would prefer to be able to talk about ‘chance’ only. All such ‘recurrent similarities’ (p. 11) are uncanny (1919, p. 12). However, the pivotal sense in which Freud talks about the uncanny is the context of repression: “uncanny is in reality nothing new or foreign, but something familiar and old-established in the mind” that has been estranged only by the process of repression (Freud, 1919, p. 13). The uncanny ought to have been kept concealed, but it has come to light. It is that which, crucially, has already been very familiar to us (heimlich), but became forbidden, awkward and unhomely (unheimlich) *because* it was repressed (Freud, 1919, p. 14). It is new, but old, like a ghost of the recently deceased. Whether subconsciously repressed (Freud, 1923) or deliberately forgotten, the unwanted

notions re-appear and shall be haunting one's attempts to, once again, resume 'life as usual'.

The 'uncanny' evokes parasiting themes through conceptual association with 'repetition', 'recurrence', as well as 'repression'. Indeed, if Derridian deconstruction involving the search for and inclusion of 'parasites' is an attempt to embrace and surface the once concealed full spectrum of meaning thus rendering justice to the sign and associated practice (1981), then Royle correctly renders it 'uncanny' (2003). The 'uncanny politics of deconstruction' (Royle, 2003) involve the formation of the *I* which in Derrida's terms always constitutes itself through that which is not here, in relationship to something else, the other (1998). 'There is no thinkable or thinking *I* before this strangely familiar or properly improper (uncanny, *unheimlich*) situation of an unaccountable language' (Derrida, 1998c, p. 29). Thus, the 'uncanny' captures the tension between being and being some-thing, some-one, some-where, since the foundational decision already involves externality, effectively compromising the distinction between the external and the internal. Hence for Heidegger, the uncanny (*unheimlich*) is the man's essence (*Menschenwesen*), the human being is the 'uncanniest of the uncanny' (Heidegger, 1996, p. 68). Although this is what makes us what we are, or rather precisely because of that, the uncanny is 'terrible' and 'compels panic fear' (Heidegger, 2000, p.149).

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Parasite and Uncanny – experiencing work in bureaucracy

This paper posits that the emerging theoretical framework is fit to render the organizational actor’s experience of depersonalized bureaucratic work imbued in rationalist logic and entailing recurrent repetition, as well as disidentification with the final product.

Grasping the organizational realities via interaction – with a recent memo, with an established policy document [3], through discussion ensuing in a project team meeting, etc. – introduces a mediating screen through which events, objects and people are construed. Doubling up ‘reality’ through reflection, mirroring the world through our attempts at understanding it, thus ending up with two ‘worlds’, similar and yet different, is often perceived to be our predilection – as Heidegger, Derrida, Serres and Royle would assent. Organizational mechanisms may be introduced in line with this propensity to multiply realities; the major difference between individual and organizational cognition process being that the latter’s ‘double’ is more prone to be rationalized and objectified, e.g. as an instruction or as a ‘code of conduct’. Admittedly, such documents, policies and codes – remnants of past sensemaking attempts – have tentative lineaments at their origins: they were most likely created through some sort of intersubjective process. And yet, while in many cases those externalizations will ‘embrace their parasite’, i.e. remain tentative in spirit, prone to interpretation, etc., in other instances they will lose this interactive supplement and become super-objective,

immutable, unfeasible to amend and, as a result, easy to replicate (thus ‘starving’ the parasite). Importantly, in these cases – which the current paper is especially interested in – the replication refers to the *final product* rather than the sensemaking process involved in creating it. As in certain organizations the space for mediation and doubling up the ‘reality’ is significantly reduced, the uncanny traits resurface in the relation between their very ‘final’, multiplied objects and human agents in whose job description those objects feature prominently. The question: “What does it mean to be the sense-maker?” is turned into: “How does it feel not to be?” In addressing the latter, accounting for conspicuous attempts to eradicate parasitism resulting in uncanny experiences will occur helpful, as this article will demonstrate.

The degree of the said immutability of the final vocabulary will vary between different forms of social interaction and specifically, between different organizational forms emerging from them. The bureaucratic insistence on structural inflexibility and standardisation (Pugh, 1966) in correlation with the development of impersonal rules and centrality of decision making (famously observed by Crozier, 1964), amounts to ‘one size fits all (and always)’ approach. It is combined with distancing the decision from the context of its applicability, as well as alienating employees from the result of their labour by implementing measures over which they have neither control nor ownership.

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The above parasitic-uncanny frame appears well placed to explore the meaning making within the bureaucratic organizational form, complete with its sets of vicious circles, high repetitiveness of operation, insistence on rules and regulations disambiguating organizational reality and absolving employees from active sensemaking (except for rare ‘zones of uncertainty’ discussed by Crozier [1964]). This paper aims to consider the invoked disempowering effects of bureaucracies (Heckscher and Applegate, 1994), their perceptions as dysfunctional (Haslam, 2001) and dehumanizing (Bauman, 1989) through experiences and meaning-making of employees. The emphasis here is on (1) how these traits of bureaucracy are experienced, and (2) how accumulated experiences become embedded in individual mental frames of employees.

Methodology

The current study explores the uncanny notions evoked by the numbing disambiguation process (‘starving the parasite’) experienced by a particular professional group in specific organizational context, namely that of translators working for the Institutions of the European Union.

Most Institutions of the European Union, including Council of the European Union, European Parliament, the Commission, etc. (‘Institutions’) have their own translating services. While English, French and German are the working languages of the EU, in

principle, all important documents are translated into the national languages, because member states have the right and are expected to be addressed using their own respective languages. As a result, some documents need to be translated into all 24 official languages of the EU. Despite the fact that only rarely such thorough translation process takes place, it is common to use more than ten languages, which renders the task of translation in the Institutions indeed enormous. According to recent estimates all translating staff of the Institutions amount to approximately 3000 employees (although, partly in relation to recent 'efficiency measures', their numbers are in the process of being reduced). The translating services within each Institution are compartmentalized according to nationalities: as a general rule translators work in their own national units under their own (national) Heads of Units.

The range of duties is strictly determined and in most cases limited to neatly specified responsibilities of the particular functional unit. As discussed elsewhere (citation concealed for review purposes), taking initiative is commonly discouraged and the level of expertise (expressed through the granular grading system) is broadly perceived as a token of relative power rather than problem-solving capacity. Hierarchy is strict and career advancement system is predominantly seniority-based (although favourable results of annual reviews can accelerate one's progression). Unsurprisingly, the Institutions with their emphasis on strict hierarchy, dependence on rules and regulations and formal authority are perceived as an embodiment of bureaucracy (Gravier, 2013).

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In the current study, the paradigmatic autonomy of translator’s profession stereotypically associated with high-skilled and creative work practice (e.g. Gouadec, 2007) is explored in the context in which this autonomy and creativity are at best limited. The reinterpretation of the notion of translation and the translator’s work in bureaucratic organizational setting provides a space for theoretical association of the standardisation and immobilization of signifiers in the translation process with the uncanny job experience and organizational design.

The inquiry into the ‘uncanny translation’ in the bureaucratic institutional framework of the EU involves an interpretivist study informed by the theoretical threads concerning the themes of *uncanniness* and *parasitic logic*.

In the course of research twelve employees of one of the translation units forming part of one of EU institutions (which shall remain anonymous to protect the informants) were interviewed. The interviews were semi-structured, the recorded material was transcribed and analysed.

The current approach broadly conforms to the thematic analysis framework, in which identified patterns (themes) within the data set are organized and analysed (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The themes ‘represent patterned response or meaning within the data set’ and aim to capture ‘something important’ about it (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 82). Both implicit and explicit ideas should be identified (Guest et al, 2012), hence in the current

research organization of themes went beyond the semiotic presence of triggering keywords to include senses made by participants.

All interviews were conducted without a specified preconceived agenda in mind (May, 1991), other than to explore experiences of translators in an institutional context otherwise known (from literature and through multiple informal conversations with the EU employees conducted beforehand) for its strictness and high degree of formalization of procedures (although these notions were not imposed on participants in the interview questions). The first five interviews were considered a preparatory stage during which important themes were expected to emerge from interpretivist material in response to relatively general questions asked by the interviewer (e.g. ‘What do you value in your work?’, ‘How does the experience of working here compare to your previous work as a translator?’). Subsequently, the emerging themes addressing the experience of work were grouped into over a dozen categories – those relevant for the current article [4] included: automatization, standardization, simplification, normalization, repetitiveness (boredom), recurrence, creativity (or lack of it) entrapment and agency. Taking a cue from these focal categories, the subsequent (seven) interviews implicitly embedded them in the interview topics. For instance, as the first four categories were most commonly associated with the broader theme of a new translation system – not addressed by the direct question in the first set of interviews – at the second stage experiences associated with application of this system were more explicitly elicited

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through questions. Thus, in order to bolster the analytic structure of the inquiry, in the second stage, incoming data were organized in an iterative fashion on the basis of themes already emerged (albeit without fully embracing the precepts of the grounded theory [Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Becker, 1970]). Similarly, to make the best use of the categories spontaneously appearing at the first stage, the emotionally-loaded themes of entrapment, (lack of) agency and repetitiveness were further inquired by probing into feelings associated with different aspects of work, e.g. the revision process and the obligation to use the automated database. Every effort was made to avoid any suggestions on the part of the interviewer: analytic categories characterizing focal themes were entirely absent from the questions asked. The analysis of the second set of interviews confirmed that the initial categorization of themes feasibly captured the main lines of inquiry: all the themes previously identified were further developed through interview content. At the second stage only one semi-independent theme emerged ('activities pursued beyond the work context'), which however is beyond the scope of the current paper. As after conducting 12 interviews it became clear that interview material became largely repetitive and the emergence of entirely new themes was unlikely, it was decided that no additional interviews were needed at this point [5].

During the ex post analysis, the narratives which the above themes conveyed occurred to converge around two related, but identifiable plotlines: the experiential effects of the automatization of work and the semantic aspects of managing the translation process.

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9 The conceptualization of the findings in these two broad categories was facilitated by
10 introducing the theoretical frame combining multifaceted non-concept of the uncanny
11 and (Serresian-Derridian) rendition of the parasitic logic, which (respectively)
12 correspond to the plotlines of the inquiry.
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17 The relevance of the subsequent facets of this theoretical framework emerges from the
18 empirical themes, hence empiria interweaves with theoretical inquiry with the intention
19 to benefit the line of argument.
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26 As it is customary in interpretivist research (Guba and Lincoln, 1994; Kostera, 2008;
27 van Maanen, 1988) the interviews were supplemented by observations (field notes) and
28 an analysis of auxiliary material (in this case consisting of official and internal
29 publications of the European Union institutions, see [6]). The rules and procedures of
30 working for the Institutions are highly centralized and must be obeyed by translators
31 working for different linguistic units to the same (or very similar) extent (Staff
32 regulations, 2004). Therefore, despite the fact that only one linguistic unit was
33 approached, typically the processes of translation described in the study are
34 generalizable to other translation units of the EU institutions. Research material was
35 collected between March and June 2013. Names of the employees, the type of the
36 linguistic unit approached, and its location were all changed to protect the informants.
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Empiria

Observing the architectural threads dominant in the materiality of EU Institutions one may me stricken by the invariance of homogenous ‘glass and steel’ look, especially in the Brussels ‘European’ and Luxemburg’s Kirchberg districts, where jointly most Institutions are located. Judging from the author’s numerous visits to these Institutions and from his conversations with members of staff, one can conclude that the spatial heterogeneity of working conditions for different translating units is similarly limited. The long corridors strewn with single offices on each side, washed out colors and minimalist décor are common features of many Institutional buildings, irrespective of the professional group occupying it – including translators. Regardless of the time of day, the stroll along the office spaces provides little insight into ongoing activity, as loud conversations are rare and most exchanges hushed. The subdued ambient of the back office is not representative for all Institutional spaces at all times, but those outbursts of hectic activity do not waive the atmosphere of quiet concentration and reticence in which translation work typically unfolds. The overarching feel, both in terms of space provided and the employees’ conduct, could not be more at odds with the stereotypical hype of ‘creative professions’ and places where they blossom.

Work process – starving the parasite

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11 *Automation.* The sequential and machine-like themes feature prominently in
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13 employees' description of their work:
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18 *I try to grasp the sentence before and the sentence that follows and I recreate the content*
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20 *in another language. It is a sequence.* (Jenny)

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22 *[It] is automatic; you don't need to think about it much.* (Claudia)

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26 Commenting on the scope of intervention expected from the translator, John says:
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30 *The text is automatically displayed by [software], which is like a machine, [...] I just*
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32 *accept it. There is not much time to think about it and ponder the issue.* (John)

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37 Hence, translation is supposed to closely resemble the previous version of a similar text.
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39 In fact, the very high degree of resemblance is inscribed in the work routine (Michael).
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41 By 'reading the text again and again', the translator ensures that the end result is
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43 'identical' (Jenny) or 'synonymous' (Steffen) with the original.
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48 *Standardization.* The standards for translating words and phrases are being developed
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The ‘terminology group’ [which] sorts this out for everybody’s sake: [so that you can just] find words, phrases and put them in. (Claudia)

Thus, vocabulary and phrasing of sentences are compared against the established pattern.

It is often reminded that those rules used to be fluid, but they solidified with time:

It all became standardised and people started to translate according to the strictly established rules. Today the text is supposed to be a standard one. (Andrew)

Stabilizing pattern was eventually normalized (cf. Foucault, 1975), as discussed below.

Simplification and disambiguation. As Andrew explains:

[Those texts] don’t give you any freedom, there is no room for interpretation, there is no room for [such terms as] ‘hereinafter’... I had a colleague once and he would use ‘hereinafter’ a lot and they would just remove it from the text. There is no space for beauty here. [...] Ever since the vocabulary got set the freedom ended and the frames stiffened. (Andrew)

Thus, closed circuit of predetermined, automated relay of information in the translation units of EU institutions seems to provide a conspicuous example of investing significant resources in eradicating the semantic space (or remainder) in the process of translation. Mechanization and standardization of translation are accompanied by the simplification of the process. The disambiguation of meanings is one of its goals: ambiguity is an unwanted element; its occurrence is targeted, scrutinized and subsequently removed (Karen).

Repetition. Many translators point towards another process accompanying the above:

We need to refer to the previous versions, previous documents and established rules.

(Claudia)

When I create the translation memory [at the beginning of the translation process] it contains all terms appearing in the document [which were] already translated at some point by someone else. (Michael)

Thus, the work process involves constant ‘looking-back’ and reaching into the past to access pre-established notions, which:

[...] we have to stick to [...]. Things like quotation style, etc. are already set. You always have to check with [database]. (Michael)

If we're talking about short texts, such as notifications, etc., you have nearly 100% of repeatable content. (John)

Employees emphasized repeatability as an immanent feature of translation:

In our line of work the content gets very repeatable. (Ivonne)
I start with the first segment, that is the first sentence and I go segment by segment, sentence after sentence, page by page... (Michael)

Repeatability is inherent as much in the job design as in the type of texts:

Those texts are fleeting – they are only supposed to be used once and for a specified purpose. But you get the next ones and the next ones... and the next. (John)

Normalization. Translators often stressed ‘normality’ of everyday work routine involving all above elements. As John emphatically declared:

Why would you bang your head against the wall, why would you try to create something new or say that it isn't nice the way it is?! It is much better to use the established vocabulary than to figure things out on your own. I remember talking to this guy, I said 'Listen, don't [try to be creative] because it only makes things difficult for us and you

make it difficult for yourself too'. [Eventually] he agreed that it makes no sense. [...]

(John)

The conviction that the EU translator's job entails the need to embrace the above sentiment was indeed common (e.g. Karen, Claudia, Ivonne).

Thus, the emerging function of automatic translation appears to be to disambiguate by reducing equivocality and to standardize the content through simplification and ensuring repeatability. The translation system arranges the words in different languages like pieces of a puzzle: each one can connect with a few others, but the number of connections is limited and predetermined and so is each piece's place in the emerging structure. 'Parasitism' is enabled inasmuch as each singular piece/word suits somewhere and connects with others, but only with particular others in a particular space: it cannot be turned around or upside down (metaphorized) as it would no longer fit. The connections are limited by the established rules, which preclude possible contents and relations in which the sign could feature. From the perspective in which the sign's function is to mediate in the process of communication and the conditions for such mediation process are correlated with the capacity of each sign to form relationships with other signs – whether through Serres' 'disruption' or Derrida's 'différance', both being instances of 'parasitic' logic – the structural translation mode in the institutions of the European Union is not an actual 'translation'. Meanings are being (or 'should be')

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following the system’s logic) rendered automatically without leaving space for an evident remainder. Here, the ‘perfect translation’ is tantamount to flawless unequivocal correspondence between two sets of signs. The capacity of the human being to ‘disrupt’ the automated matching is minimized, the human-parasite is no longer expected to act as a middle man between the two sets of data. Thus the semantic parasite must also go: the ‘other within itself’ - enabling connections due to being equivocal and ambiguous - is forced out by the seamlessly automated perfection of transmission.

In Derridian and Serresian terms each attempt to immobilize the signifiers in some predetermined position and to remove the translator-mediated process of content matching is tantamount to rendering those signifiers linguistic curiosities and to turning the, so-called, ‘translation’ into a meaningless disruption-free autotelic exercise.

The uncanny problem is that the parasite is not feasible to undergo the process of removal – not without obliterating the host.

Experiencing work - the uncanniness of translation

The existence of something near identical hidden within something else - *mise en abyme* (Gide, A., in: L. Dällenbach, 1977/1989, p. 7) - is one of Freud’s uncanny tropes (1919) stimulating the wildly uncontrollable repetition (Hertz, 2009). The structural *mise en abyme* is inscribed in the ‘Russian doll’ mechanism of language management involving three mutually inclusive instances: the centralized terminology database containing

obligatory terms and expressions; the local terminology base (specific to separate linguistic units within the EU institutions) enforcing their own rules (compliant with the general ones), and finally; the half-official 'group of experts' making micro-level decisions e.g. regarding the yet undecided issues (compliant with the general rules above). The rules and renditions are reinforced on the subsequent levels, as they reappear and multiply. This strict multilevel crosschecking and self-referencing system instantiates the reappearance of rules, words, meanings and signs in the subsequent instalments of the translation process. Once a particular rule of translation had been established...

...then it's got to be there and the terminologists include it in the database. If something is there we don't have to repeat the whole search again. And if it's not there it can appear in the automated memory. If something was translated at any point it will be re-used.

(Karen)

The meanings rely on each other, link to one another, changing them becomes unlikely:

These things are already settled, pre-established, and even if for some translators they do not seem settled it is very easy to verify that they are. (Chris)

The infinitely multiplied content remains the same and should pose no obstacles, but interestingly, this immutability of the text can also be startling:

I can be sure this text won't change really, I know the text from day one, and I don't need to wait up and see what's coming. (Paul)

This is all routine... It is already known. (Chris)

This inward looking past orientedness is captured by another set of uncanny tropes - Freud's 'double' (1919, p. 10) and Rank's *Doppelgänger* (1914), both referring to the creation of one's own mental image, long since left behind 'and one, no doubt, in which it wore a more friendly aspect' (Freud, 1919, p. 10). The *double* reminds one of oneself, because it used to be oneself (or at least an image of it) but ever since it became repressed or half-forgotten.

In my previous job I had to come up with the way to say something in a few different ways, but we don't have that here. (Paul)

...Where I worked previously I was allowed to be a rather creative translator and [here] I was [also] trying to use my sense of what's good and what's not, but I was rather quickly tamed by others... (Carol)

The past that does not let go – *déjà vu* represents the experiential feature of translation.

The topic resurfaced over and over again and it was finally agreed that Institutions are introducing a linguistic novelty – [using the form proposed by the terminologists] became obligatory in legal texts, was endowed with the rank of an official legal term and must be applied by the translators. (Stan)

[The new document] uses the memory containing all previously translated texts. Hence, the translator can retrieve something from this memory and he won't need to translate it again. (Stan)

In Serra and Holt's uncanny artwork 'Boomerang' (1974), once uttered words come back, reoccur. Similarly, in translation system:

These are the things you are stuck with. (Paul)

Even though no longer actively performed, words and meanings stay within the experiential frame:

If something was already translated in some way in another institution you can't really change it. (Paul)

One time we had a long discussion around a particular sentence, it took three days. (Jane)

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Just like in *Boomerang* translators appear surrounded by their own minds externalized through words:

I don't have to translate things, which were already translated at some point, but on the other hand if the system suggests something I don't have to accept it, I can decide that it is not good enough and choose something else... Ehm, actually in this case it is not really possible, because if something comes up on the grid it means that this document was already translated, so actually it makes no sense at all to do it again. If someone translated it, say, one year ago it makes very little sense to translate it again... (Carol)

The struggle to decide one's own degree of agency is mediated by the content's constant reoccurrence. Mary seems to find it disruptive, making the reflection on her everyday work process difficult:

So, I choose the text to translate and... hmmm... (pause)... I have to reflect on this for a second.... Well, I don't have the computer screen in front of me at the moment, but when I do, it is all purely automatic. (Mary)

Official documents in the target language abound with words and expressions, which are considered by the interviewees as out of date or plainly wrong, to the point that

many translators not only feel confused, but also no longer feel in charge of the process.

The following examples, evoked by translators in the context of devolving them of agency over the meanings rendered, were subsequently scrutinized and verified by the researcher in the process of analysing official documents in the target language [6].

As pointed out by Stan, the English expression ‘active aging’ is obligatorily translated in the target language as the expression which could be understood [in English] as ‘aging actively’. The translators observe that:

[It is] as if you could age ‘better’ or ‘more thoroughly’ – as if you weren’t waiting passively to grow old, but rather striving to get old by all means available... which is absurd... However, ‘aging actively’ was accepted and confirmed [...]. It became an exemplary of the bureaucratic jargon, which goes against the rules of using language.
(Stan)

Another term widely used in EU speak, ‘to contribute’, is associated via database with the expression synonymous with ‘to contribute a contribution’ (in the English version). Paul is strongly opposed to what he perceives as an odd vocabulary misuse:

I never used it, I always applied something else, but I was corrected many times...
(Paul)

‘Best practices’, an expression popular in EU documents, is compulsorily translated as, rarely used, bureaucratic and ostensibly archaic term. As Paul observed direct translation would be most fortunate as it unmistakably renders meaning intended, however:

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Despite the fact that this formulation exists in many sources, it needs to be translated using the old term. (Paul)

Contents not quite ‘one’s own’ and yet necessarily embraced – the uncanny struggle to differentiate between the animate and inanimate objects (Jentsch, 1906/1995) is ongoing:

[As the] translation becomes more and more mechanized you are just a cog in the machine which must function one way or another. (Paul)

I’m just one of the points of passage in the production line of EU documents. (Stan)

Despite working in a ‘factory’ ... we are still thinking human beings! (Alice)

The parallel uncanny thread sheds light on the psychological complexity of these recurring *déjà vu*s through ontological confusion, which is not as much the question of the object, but rather the subject who construes reality in conceptually repressed terms. Something is uncanny because it was known, and an insufficient effort to forget it was made (Freud, 1919). As a result, the uncanny content is haunting us, making it difficult to tell what an object actually is, what certain activity is about or what identity the subject possesses:

Formally, what I do is called translating, but it is de facto copy-pasting rather than translating. (Stan)

The automatized translation tools make

... some people say that it kills our profession, but in fact the art of translation does not exist here. (Paul)

We are not translators anymore, we became the revisers [of the automated text]. (Alice)

The word gets around that it doesn't matter who translates what because the outcome will always be identical, which is... as if we were machines or something... (Jane)

As suggested by Freud and Heidegger, the uncanny is not psychologically-neutral:

Automatized translation can mean that you end up with bullshit. (John)

It may involve both the lack of clear purpose of professional activity and the sudden realization that it was misconstrued:

Initially, I thought that the nicer means the better, but it doesn't work that way... the more scrupulous the better. (Jane)

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Your brain just doesn't want to go on sometimes. The saturation point was reached, and the only thing you are capable to do at the moment is to create situations, which are hopelessly absurd and bear no resemblance to reality whatsoever. (Carol)

If [in the revision process] there are two, three changes per page I remain calm about all that, but if it is full of corrections... [emotionally charged tone of voice, unfinished sentence] (Carol)

The pitch of expression indicates that the working conditions are not easily or willingly accepted and are often perceived as enforced:

We must [emphasis] accept the translation of some expressions or notions due to purely political reasons, despite the fact that they are clearly incorrect and confusing. (Stan)

I never used [automated database], I always applied something else, but I was corrected so many times... (Paul)

To the extent that work is sometimes construed in truly dreadful,

[This] work is extremely boring [...] [It] is disastrous for translators. (Jane)

It is not like we are in a prison, and yet... [unfinished sentence] (Chris)

...and fatalist terms:

And this won't ever change. (Paul)

The emerging dynamics of the uncanny work process suggest that the repressed and managed meanings resume their existence, cause disturbance and ambiguity resulting in the vicious circle of boredom, recurrence and confusion with respect to one's role and professional identity.

Discussion

The extreme reduction, simplification and standardization of translated content is achieved due to inflexible (or near inflexible) relationship in which signifiers stand to one another. Strictly speaking the logic of EU translation, so far partly embraced in practice, entails that words cannot be matched/translated 'better' or 'worse', but rather 'correctly' and 'incorrectly'. The translation system's core is a threefold structure which in the order of increasing specificity and decreasing authority involves the centralized terminology database; the local terminology base related to separate linguistic units enforcing their own rules and the group of experts within each separate unit. While the particular renditions provided by the two latter may capture some aspects not included in the general database, they must comply with it and they may end up being

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incorporated in it thus becoming parts of the centralized structure. This threefold design is the source of enforceable rules and procedures of translation between languages. The option to improve one’s translation, if ‘improving’ involves bending or breaking the said rules in order to say something better, to more closely relate to common experience (the sense of which is often lacking, as most translators suggest) does not officially exist. Its scope is being increasingly constricted by the progressing application of automated translation tools, and in most cases is deemed to have already disappeared in practice. Such system prevents translators from forming new connections (including those already existing in the spoken language, since the official database is said to be reacting with considerable delay to such changes) and from combining the existing signs into new shapes enabling the sign’s heterogeneity to thrive and thus to learn something new. As observed by one of the interviewees apparently referring to the texts not yet translated, their content is ‘already known’, it is pre-established and shall not change. According to the operating logic, translators become akin to machines – irrespective of actual machines doing a significant and increasing part of the translation work – automatically producing the standardized renditions which they are compelled to provide without a trace of individualized understanding: in any case this is how many of them experience it.

Starving the semantic parasite is accompanied by famishing the social one: as captured by translators’ another constriction-oriented metaphor, namely ‘the prison’. The pursuit

of an ideal translation involving no equivocality, no interpretation and no disturbance seems to involve lack of need for interaction as well. Admittedly, the intersubjective exchange has not disappeared entirely; it still exists owing to the group of experts and through the spontaneous outbursts of collegial exchange (citation concealed for review purposes), but from the system's logic perspective those instances and behaviours are redundant (e.g. 'experts' would not be needed if the actual system's perfection were achieved). The feelings of regulated isolation, of seclusion and imprisonment in the anonymous structure, appear to be firmly embedded in employees' experience. No 'otherness', 'intrusion' or 'disruption' are required for the translation process to proceed – its content is already known.

Drawing on the standardization and simplification of content, the Institutions' translation system assumes this content's extended longevity in the translation process by enforcing the multiplication, re-appropriation and recurrence of pre-established meanings. Uncanny is associated with unsettling employee's psychological balance and/or their ways of conduct as well as upsetting the safety zones and boundaries, but – although the clinical precision is not to be expected when discussing such non-concepts – it extends beyond the notion of psychological discomfort to include, among others, infinite repetition, ontological confusion, déjà vu, 'doubling' and recurrence. While, admittedly, such characterization confounds rather heterogeneous psychological categories it is so because 'the uncanny' is an attempt to render particular aspects of the

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heterogeneity of experience, namely those that deal with its unexpected multiplicity coupled with a sense of familiarity. The translators are ‘haunted’ by previous enactments of the translation process – the words they once uttered re-occur, unchanged, frozen in time. Pre-establishing the exact phraseology means that the relationships between signs are also immutable, they have already been seen in precisely such form previously, they have to be included now and be dealt with in identical manner in the future. The translation system does not allow forgetting, its logic is that of accumulation not selection. The latter occurs when central database is amended, but the change is centrally planned and modification merely reflects the already existing pattern, which once again does not allow it to be forgotten. Nothing is to be wasted, efficiency is the name of the game, the process is strictly ascetic – only and all necessary elements are employed. The attempts to close one’s eyes and not see the same again and again, to ‘forget’ the ever-so-familiar, are managed by the system’s internal logic – there is no space for ‘hereinafter’. The notional framework of the uncanny captures a range of aspects of this ‘strange familiarity’ which is not feasible to be consigned to oblivion – past professional identities invade the current ones; the latter are vague and uncertain; one’s infinitely multiplied reflection can be found in each translated sentence, words and meanings insistently re-occur. However, the uncanniness of translation reaches much further; also those relationships between signs which were forbidden and translated out of the system inevitably find their way back in. As

mentioned above, the parasite cannot be eradicated since it forms one entity with the host and only the (particular) perspective taken enables to differentiate between the two. The logic of the translation system provides such clearly delineated perspective: the system 'knows' exactly who the host is. But that does not make parasitic connections – or the multiplicity of meanings which a given sign or set of signs can have – disappear. They linger in the background and occasionally find their way to the surface eventually emerging as 'nicer', 'better' or more 'humane' ways of meaning-making; the ways invariably deemed 'colloquial', 'obsolete', or more likely simply 'incorrect', by the system. Given that by definition all translators employed by the Institutions are specialized in linguistics of various sorts, their knowledge regarding all kinds of semantic parasites is overwhelming. That only adds to the thorniness of its repression. 'Nicer' and 'better' parasitic connections do come back, and it is likely that they will continue to do so as long as the fully automatized and automated machine translation does not replace the current system involving human actors.

This anti-parasitic (uncanny) logic of translation in the translation units of the Institutions practically removes the need for ongoing and direct supervision and reduces the requirement for non-continuous control to its sporadic enactments (e.g. annual appraisals). In spite of strictly hierarchical structure, the major controlling mechanism is embedded not within the vertical supervision, but on a much more fundamental

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semantic level. The very system employed in the translation process significantly limits the possibility of divergence from the pre-established framework since multiple possible meanings are not allowed to play in this language game (cf. Wittgenstein, 1953) and because those games, which are allowed must be played repeatedly, the bridge between them not being provided due to parasite’s demise (cf. Clegg et al., 2004). If rules were forgotten, whether deliberately or not, they would have been ‘reminded’ by the system and – if still ignored – enforced through the horizontal peer pressure employing pragmatic arguments and the ‘strangely familiar’ system’s logic. The autonomy of an individual translator is not much greater than that of an individual sign: the relationship in which both can partake is circumscribed and limited by the same instance – the (in the short period at least) immutable database. The lack of need to consult other vocabularies is simultaneous with lacking requirement for interaction. Both were captured by the translators as ‘lack of need for research’ – nothing can or will be discovered, nothing new or unexpected can be unearthed or learned, because such creative interactivity and exploration – the parasites – are translated out of the framework. The autonomy of the translator is limited to potentially affecting the content of the final database in the long run, if they partake in relevant discussions concerning new vocabulary. However, by the time it makes it to the final database it is no longer ‘new’, it has been already heard, rehearsed and it became familiar. Setting identical iterations of translations against one another, making them bounce off from one another

without evident possibility to enact change on those relationships frozen in time, forces the similar *mise en abyme* on the translators' activity. Repetition becomes associated with boredom, automation with loss of purpose, externally imposed sensemaking with mindlessness and immutability with frustration. The translator's creativity disappears behind the veil of standardized homogeneity, autonomy is redacted, communication rendered monologic, specialization narrowed, regulations and guidelines rule and individuality is reduced. Of interest here is the disciplined and internally coherent manner of performing bureaucracy on the level of everyday experience aligned with the system's internal logic. Even if bureaucracies' typical 'features' (hierarchy, dependence on rules, formalized authority, functional specialization) were once imposed, now the bureaucratic control is stealthily embedded behaviourally as much as semantically. Thus, bureaucracy ingrains itself in the semantics of the system and the particular organization becomes its mere reflection.

Conclusion

Beyond the existing theorizing of translation as creative and positive disruption in both occupational (e.g. Gouadec, 2007) and semantic terms (e.g. Barrett, 1998; Clegg, et al., 2004), the current study explores translation through experiential framework of professional translators and as a meaning-making process respectively, in both cases

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arriving at potentially monologic notions of organizational learning. Supporting the case for the role of translation in creating dialogic and radical climates for learning, this article proposes to explore the other side of this relationship showing how the limiting of space for translation delimits possibilities for new meanings to be created and thus (dialogic) learning to thrive. In addition to this general point, the above study ponders the specific aporia of increasing difficulty of such translation in the occupational context apparently devoted to semantic work, namely that of translator.

The simplification, constriction and standardization on the semantic and societal levels within the framework of the Institutions was approached from the perspective of ‘parasitic logic’ which provides an explanatory device for organizational actor’s sensemaking. The experiences accompanying work processes in the translation unit are captured through the non-concept of the uncanny evoking repeatability, multiplication, unwanted recurrence and awkward familiarity. This paper argues that the basic rules ingrained in the bureaucratic logic, when applied to allegedly creative, dialogic and autonomous organizational roles, such as translation, imply the immobilization and infinite repetitions of these roles’ avowedly free-floating content precluding non-monologic learning. The experienced boredom, frustration and purposelessness, are however not the simple results of strict control and lack of choice – often discussed in the context of deficiencies of bureaucratic structures – but rather of (apparently onerous in this case) psychological traits of the uncanny. The article posits that the impossibility

to forget and the inexorableness of partaking in the never-ending déjà vu, with all ‘strange familiarity’ of the context, are the reflections of the bureaucratic frame, and may be used in future studies as experiential and semantic heuristics for understanding learning and un-learning in organizations.

Notes

[1] Admittedly, the issue of ‘context’ in Derrida (and whether there is one) is somewhat ambiguous (e.g. compare (1988a) and (1976)) and warrants a separate discussion, which cannot be provided here.

[2] Derrida’s ‘issue of translation’ is not to be understood solely as translation between languages, but it is understood as such as well (Derrida 1985; 1987; 1990; 1990; 1997) and probably becomes most explicit in the *Letter to a Japanese Friend* (1988b), in which deconstruction and translation are perceived as closely related to one another.

[3] The Actor Network’s perspective from which objects ‘speak’ and ‘act’ is a fitting strategy for approaching the agencies inherent in materiality of the (work)place – such perspective is in fact embraced elsewhere by the author. Unfortunately, due to limited space ANT cannot be used in the current paper.

[4] Those themes (which are not discussed in the current paper, but were pursued elsewhere), among others, include the sociomaterial trait and distant/tele-work.

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[5] The anonymized interview transcripts as well as the interview question set are available upon the editor’s request.

[6] Unfortunately, the bibliographical reference to these official EU documents cannot be provided: it would unambiguously point towards one of the official target languages of the EU, which, given a limited number of EU Institutions (and respective linguistic services within them), would make it easy to identify the unit and the participants.

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